

"NEVER-STOP ACTION AND
MIND-BENDING CONCEPTS COMBINE TO MAKE
ORION ABSOLUTELY UNFORGETTABLE...
BEN BOVA BRINGS IT TO INTENSE LIFE ON A
CANVAS SPREAD OVER TIME AND SPACE."
—ISAAC ASIMOV

ORION



BEN BOVA

PART ONE: PHOENIX

CHAPTER 1

I am not superhuman.

I do have abilities that are far beyond those of any normal man's, but I am just as human and mortal as anyone on Earth.

The core of my abilities is apparently in the structure of my nervous system. I can take completely conscious control of my entire body. I can direct my will along the chain of synapses instantly to make any part of my body do exactly what I wish it to do.

Last year I learned to play the piano in two hours. My teacher, a mild, gray little man, absolutely refused to believe that I had never touched a keyboard before that day. Earlier this year I stunned a Tae Kwan Do master by learning in less than a week everything he had absorbed in a lifetime of unceasing work. He tried to be humble and polite about it, but it was clear that he was furious with me and deeply ashamed of himself for being so. I left his class.

My powers are growing. I have always been able to control my heartbeat and breathing. I thought everyone could until I began reading about yogis and their "mystical" abilities. For me, their tricks are child's play.

Two months ago I found myself sitting in a restaurant in midtown Manhattan. I tend to be a solitary man, so I often take my lunch hour late enough to avoid the noisy crowds. It was after 3:00 p.m. and the restaurant was almost empty. A few couples were sitting at scattered tables, speaking in hushed tones. A middle-aged pair of tourists were studying the French menu warily, suspicious of food they had never heard of before. A couple of secret lovers sat well toward the rear, holding hands furtively, glancing up toward the door every few seconds. One young woman sat alone, not far from my own table near the front of the restaurant. She was beautiful, with dark hair curling at her shoulders and the strong, classic facial features that marked her as a photographer's model.

She happened to glance in my direction, and her calm, intelligent eyes penetrated to my soul. Her eyes were large, gray as a polar sea, and seemed to hold all the knowledge of the world. Suddenly I realized that I was not

merely a solitary man; I was a lonely man. Like a love-struck puppy, I wanted desperately to go over to her table and introduce myself.

But her gaze shifted to the door. I turned to see a man enter, a strikingly handsome, gold-maned man of that indeterminate age between thirty and fifty. He stood by the door for a moment, then went to the bar up by the curtained plate glass window and took a stool. Even though he was wearing a conservative gray business suit, he looked more like a movie idol or an ancient Greek god than a Manhattan executive who was getting an early start on the cocktail hour.

My gray-eyed beauty stared at him, as if unable to pull herself free of his spell. There was an aura about him, a golden radiance. The air almost seemed to glow where he was sitting. Deep inside me, a long-buried memory began to nag at me. I felt that I knew him, that I had met him long ago. But I could not remember where or when or under what circumstances.

I looked back at the young woman. With a visible effort, she tore her gaze away from the golden man and looked toward me. The corners of her lips curled upward slightly in a smile that might have been an invitation. But the door opened again and she looked away from me once more.

Another man entered the restaurant and went directly to the bar, sitting around its curve so that his back faced the curtained window. If the first man was a golden angel, this one had the look of a midnight netherworld about him. His face was heavy and grim; his muscular body bulged his clothing. His hair was jet black and his eyes burned angrily under heavy, bushy brows. Even his voice seemed heavy and dark with fury when he ordered a brandy.

I finished my coffee and decided to ask for my check, then stop at the model's table on my way out. I started to look for my waiter among the four of them loafing by the kitchen doors in the rear of the restaurant, conversing in a mixture of French and Italian. That is what saved me.

A bald little man in a black coat popped out of the kitchen's swinging door and tossed a black egg-shaped object the length of the restaurant. A hand grenade.

I saw it all as if it were happening in slow motion. I realize now that my reflexes must have suddenly gone into overdrive, operating at a fantastically

fast rate. I saw the man ducking back inside the kitchen, the waiters stiffening with surprise, the couples at the other tables still talking, not realizing that death was a second or two away. The young beauty a few tables away from me had her back to the grenade, but the bartender stared straight at it as it clunked on the carpet and rolled lumpily along to within five feet of me.

I shouted a warning and leaped across the intervening tables to knock the young model out of the way of the blast. We thudded to the floor, me on top of her. The clatter of dishes and glassware was lost in the roar of the explosion. The room flashed and thundered. It shook. Then—smoke, screams, the heat of flames, the acrid smell of the explosive.

I got to my feet unharmed. Her table was splintered and the wall behind us shredded by shrapnel. Smoke filled the room. I got to my knees and saw that the young woman was unconscious. There was a gash on her forehead, but she seemed otherwise unharmed. I turned and saw through the smoke the other people in the restaurant mangled and bleeding, sprawled on the floor, slumped against the walls. Some were moaning. A woman sobbed.

I took the young model in my arms and carried her out to the sidewalk. Then I went back in and brought out another couple. As I stretched them out on the pavement among the shards of glass from the blown-out window, the police and firemen began to arrive, sirens shrieking. An ambulance was right behind them. I stood aside and let the professionals take over.

There was no sign of either of the two men who had been sitting at the bar. Both the golden one and the dark man seemed to have disappeared the instant the grenade went off. They were gone by the time I had pulled myself up off the floor. The bartender had been cut in half by the blast. His two customers had vanished.

As the firemen extinguished the smoldering blaze, the police laid out four dead bodies on the sidewalk and covered them with blankets. The medics were treating the wounded. They lifted the model, still unconscious, onto a stretcher. More ambulances arrived, and a crowd gathered around the scene, buzzing.

"Goddamned I.R.A.," grumbled one of the cops.

"Cheez, they're tossin' bombs around here, too, now?"

"Coulda been the Puerto Ricans," another cop suggested, his voice weary, exasperated.

"Or the Serbo-Croatians. They set that bomb off in the Statue of Liberty, remember?"

They questioned me for several minutes, then turned me over to the medics for a quick checkup at the back of one of the ambulances.

"You're lucky, mister," said the white-jacketed medic. "You didn't even get your hair mussed."

Lucky. I felt numb, as if my whole body had been immersed in a thick enveloping fog. I could see and move and breathe and think. But I could not *feel*. I wanted to be angry, or grief-stricken, or even frightened. But I was as calm as a stupid cow, staring at the world with placid eyes. I thought about the young woman who was being taken off to a hospital. What made me try to save her? Who was responsible for the bombing? Were they trying to kill her? Or one of the men at the bar?

Or me?

Two TV vans had arrived by now, and the news reporters were speaking to the police captain in charge of the scene while their crews unlimbered their mini-cameras. One of the reporters, a sharpfaced woman with a penetratingly nasal voice, interviewed me for a few minutes. I responded to her questions automatically, my mind dull and slow.

Once the police let me leave, I pushed my way through the milling crowd that had been drawn by the excitement and walked the three blocks back to my office. I told no one about the explosion. I went straight to my private cubicle and shut the door.

As evening fell, I was still sitting at my desk—wondering why the grenade had been thrown and how I had escaped being killed by it. Which led me to wondering why I have such physical abilities and whether those two strangers who disappeared from the bar had the same powers. I thought again about the young woman. Closing my eyes, I recalled from my memory the image of the ambulance that had taken her away. St. Mercy Hospital was printed along its side paneling. A quick check with my desktop computer gave me the hospital's address. I got up from my desk and left the office, the

lights turning off automatically behind me.

CHAPTER 2

It wasn't until I pushed through the revolving door of St. Mercy's main entrance that I realized I had no idea of the name of the woman I had come to see. And as I stood there in the middle of the frenetic, crowded, bustling lobby, I saw the foolishness of asking any of the harried-looking receptionists for help. For a few moments I was at a loss; then I spotted a uniformed policeman.

Step by step I went from one police officer to another, asking for information about the people brought in from the bombing earlier that day. I told them I was from the restaurant's insurance company. Only one of the policemen, a burly black man with a handsome mustache, eyed me suspiciously and asked for identification. I showed him my group insurance card; he barely glanced at it, but it looked official enough to satisfy him. Perhaps my air of utter confidence also helped to convince him.

In less than a half-hour I entered a ward that contained sixteen beds, half of them empty. The nurse in charge led me to the bed where the young model lay, eyes closed, a flesh-toned plastic bandage taped to her forehead.

"Only a few minutes," the nurse whispered to me.

I nodded.

"Miss Promachos," the nurse called softly, leaning over the bed. "You have a visitor."

The young woman's eyes opened. Those lustrous gray eyes that seemed as deep as eternity.

"Only a few minutes," the nurse repeated. Then she walked away, her soft-soled shoes squeaking on the tiled floor.

"You... you're the one who saved me, in the restaurant."

I could feel my heart throbbing wildly, and I made no effort to slow it. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes, thanks to you. Only this cut on my forehead; they said I won't need plastic surgery, it won't leave a scar."

"That's good."

Her lips curled upward slightly. "And a few bruises on my body and legs from being knocked down."

"Oh. I'm sorry..."

She laughed. "Don't be! If you hadn't knocked me over..." The laughter faded. Her lovely face grew serious.

I stepped closer to the bed. "I'm glad you weren't hurt seriously. I... I don't even know your name."

"Aretha," she said. "Call me Aretha." Her voice was a low, soft purr, totally feminine without being high-pitched or shrill.

She didn't ask me my name, but instead looked at me with a gaze that seemed perfectly calm, yet expectant, as if she were waiting for me to tell her something. Something important. I began to feel uneasy, confused.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" she asked.

My mouth felt dry. "Should I know?"

"You don't remember?"

Remember what? I wanted to ask her. Instead, I merely shook my head.

She reached out and took my hand. Her fingers felt cool and calming on my skin. "It's all right," she said. "I'll help you. That's why I'm here."

"To help me?" My mind was whirling now. What did she mean?

"Do you remember the two men who were sitting at the bar this afternoon?"

"The golden one..." His image was burning in my memory.

"And the other. The dark one." Aretha's face was somber now. "You remember the other one?"

"Yes."

"But you don't remember who they are, do you?"

"Should I?"

"You must," she said, gripping my hand tightly. "It is imperative."

"But I don't know who they are. I never saw them before today."

She let her head sink back on the pillows. "You *have* seen them. We both have. But you can't remember any of it."

I heard the squeak-squeak of the nurse's footsteps approaching. "This is all very confusing," I said to Aretha. "Why was the restaurant bombed? Who's behind it all?"

"That's not important. I'm here to help you recall your mission. What happened this afternoon is trivial."

"Trivial? Four people were killed!"

The nurse's hissing whisper cut through our conversation, "That's all, sir. She needs her rest."

"But..."

"She needs her rest!"

Aretha smiled at me. "It's all right. You can come back tomorrow. I'll tell you about it then."

Reluctantly, I bade her good-bye and left the hospital.

As I walked slowly through the hospital's busy maze of corridors, I paid no attention to the people rushing along beside me. Their individual tales of grief and pain were as far from me as the most distant star. My mind was boiling, seething, from the tantalizing scraps of information that Aretha had given me.

She knew me! We had met before. I should have remembered her, and the two men who had been at the bar. But my memory was as blank as a darkened, empty computer screen.

By the time I was walking down the front stairs of St. Mercy's, looking up the street for a taxi, I decided not to go home. Instead, I gave the cabbie the address of my office building—where my personnel record was on file.

The externals are easy. My name is John G. O'Ryan. That had always made me feel slightly uneasy, as though it wasn't the proper name for me, not my real name at all. John O'Ryan. It didn't feel right. I am the chief of marketing research for Continental Electronics Corporation, a multinational